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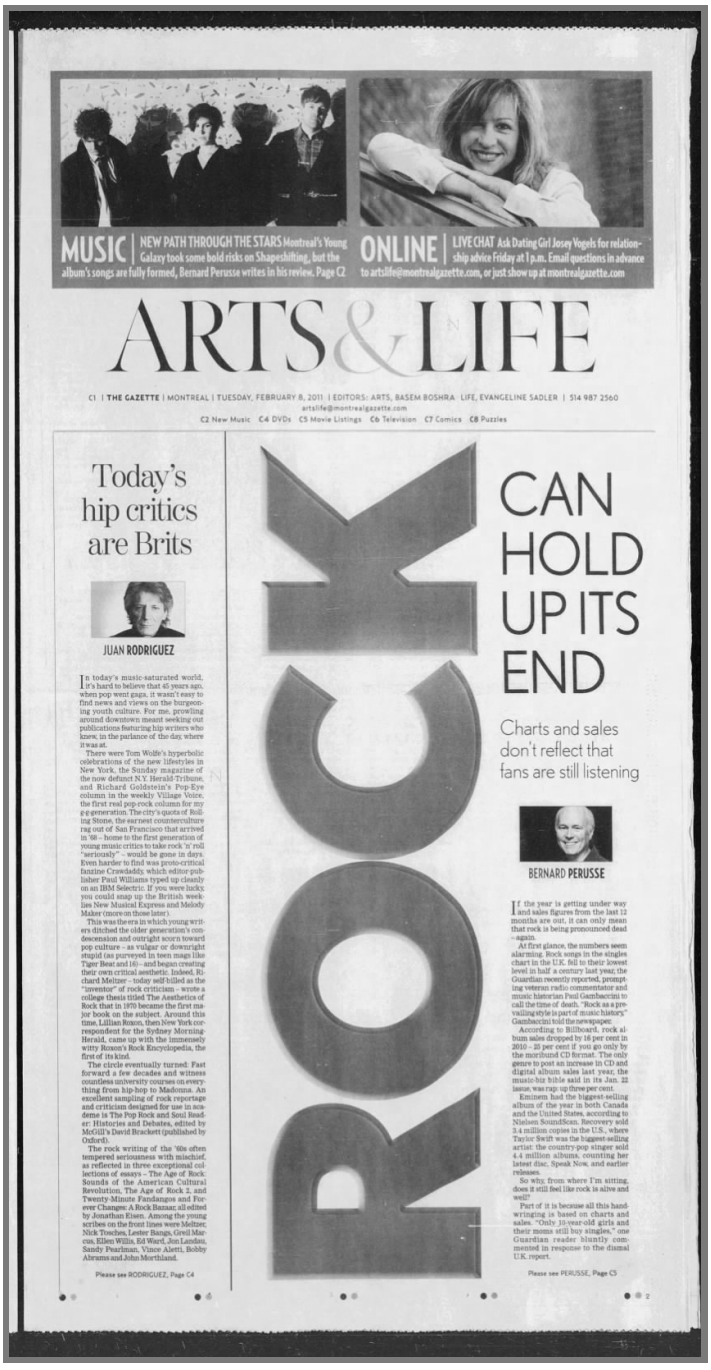

MUSIC | NEW PATH THROUGH THE STARS Montreal's Young Galaxy took some bold risks on Shapeshifting, but the album's songs are fully formed, Bernard Perusse writes in his review. Page C2

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C2 New Music C4 DVDs C5 Movie Listings C6 Television C7 Comics C8 Puzzles

Today's hip critics are Brits

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

In today's music-saturated world, it's hard to believe that 45 years ago, when pop went gaga, it wasn't easy to find news and views on the burgeoning youth culture. For me, prowling around downtown meant seeking out publications featuring hip writers who knew, in the parlance of the day, where it was at.

There were Tom Wolfe's hyperbolic celebrations of the new lifestyles in New York, the Sunday magazine of the now defunct N.Y. Herald-Tribune, and Richard Goldstein's Pop-Eye column in the weekly Village Voice, the first real pop-rock column for my g-g-generation. The city's quota of Rolling Stone, the earnest counterculture rag out of San Francisco that arrived in '68 – home to the first generation of young music critics to take rock 'n' roll "seriously" – would be gone in days. Even harder to find was proto-critical fanzine Crawdaddy, which editor-publisher Paul Williams typed up cleanly on an IBM Selectric. If you were lucky you could snap up the British weeklies New Musical Express and Melody Maker (more on those later).

This was the era in which young writers ditched the older generation's condescension and outright scorn toward pop culture – as vulgar or downright stupid (as purveyed in teen mags like Tiger Beat and 16) – and began creating their own critical aesthetic. Indeed, Richard Meltzer – today self-billed as the "inventor" of rock criticism – wrote a college thesis titled The Aesthetics of Rock that in 1970 became the first major book on the subject. Around this time, Lillian Roxon, then New York correspondent for the Sydney Morning-Herald, came up with the immensely witty Roxon's Rock Encyclopedia, the first of its kind.

The circle eventually turned: Fast forward a few decades and witness countless university courses on everything from hip-hop to Madonna. An excellent sampling of rock reportage and criticism designed for use in academe is The Pop Rock and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates, edited by McGill's David Brackett (published by Oxford).

The rock writing of the '60s often tempered seriousness with mischief, as reflected in three exceptional collections of essays – The Age of Rock: Sounds of the American Cultural Revolution, The Age of Rock 2, and Twenty-Minute Fandangos and Forever Changes: A Rock Bazaar, all edited by Jonathan Eisen. Among the young scribes on the front lines were Meltzer, Nick Tosches, Lester Bangs, Greil Marcus, Ellen Willis, Ed Ward, Jon Landau, Sandy Pearlman, Vince Aletti, Bobby Abrams and John Morthland.

Please see RODRIGUEZ, Page C4

ROCK

CAN HOLD UP ITS END

Charts and sales don't reflect that fans are still listening

BERNARD PERUSSE

If the year is getting under way and sales figures from the last 12 months are out, it can only mean that rock is being pronounced dead – again.

At first glance, the numbers seem alarming. Rock songs in the singles chart in the U.K. fell to their lowest level in half a century last year; the Guardian recently reported, prompting veteran radio commentator and music historian Paul Gambaccini to call the time of death. "Rock as a prevailing style is part of music history," Gambaccini told the newspaper.

According to Billboard, rock album sales dropped by 16 per cent in 2010 – 25 per cent if you go only by the moribund CD format. The only genre to post an increase in CD and digital album sales last year, the music-biz bible said in its Jan. 22 issue, was rap: up three per cent.

Eminem had the biggest-selling album of the year in both Canada and the United States, according to Nielsen SoundScan. Recovery sold 3.4 million copies in the U.S., where Taylor Swift was the biggest-selling artist: the country-pop singer sold 4.4 million albums, counting her latest disc, Speak Now, and earlier releases.

So why, from where I'm sitting, does it still feel like rock is alive and well?

Part of it is because all this hand-wringing is based on charts and sales. "Only 16-year-old girls and their moms still buy singles," one Guardian reader bluntly commented in response to the dismal U.K. report.

Please see PERUSSE, Page C5

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